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Subject: Implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan II in 2018: Strengthening gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external action
- Council conclusions (25 November 2019)

Delegations will find in the annex the Council conclusions on the implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan II in 2018: Strengthening gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external action, as adopted by the Council at its 3732nd meeting held on 25 November 2019.

**Council conclusions on the implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan II in 2018:
Strengthening gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external action**

1. The Council notes that during 2018, further significant progress was achieved globally on gender equality and girls' and women's empowerment. Several countries have adopted or are ready to adopt equality and anti-discrimination laws, have increased their gender budgeting and have improved the quality of their reporting and transparency processes. There is evidence that the situation of girls and women has been improving, with fewer cases of child, early and forced marriage, better social inclusion and increased participation in political, economic and public life. However, despite all the improvements, no country in the world can yet be considered to be on track for achieving gender equality by 2030. The Council is concerned that, according to estimates, with the current rate of improvement it would take 108 years to close the global gender gap¹. In many parts of the world, women's and girls' full enjoyment of all human rights are being pushed back, and civil society organisations, including women's rights organisations, are facing increasing challenges in the shrinking democratic space globally. In addition, protracted conflicts, the impact of climate change, natural disasters and situations of forced displacement exacerbate gender inequalities.
2. There is an urgent need for a much deeper, faster and more ambitious response at the global, regional and local levels, in order to deliver on Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and gender-related targets. The Council therefore reaffirms the EU's and Member States' full and unwavering commitment to achieve the 17 SDGs by 2030, including to promote women's and girls' full enjoyment of all human rights, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as a priority across all areas of policy and action. This is an overarching EU priority, and the EU Gender Action Plan is a key tool to contribute to achieving these goals by aligning the efforts of EU institutions and Member States towards that end. Progress must be accelerated and achievements to date require preserving and safeguarding against any deterioration or backlash.

¹ As stated in the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report 2018.

3. The Council recalls its conclusions of 26 November 2018 on the implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan II in 2017: Strengthening gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external action and reiterates the importance of ensuring the strategic and effective implementation of the Plan, by means of monitoring, evaluation, reporting and follow-up in all EU external relations.
4. The Council also recalls its conclusions of 10 December 2018 on Women, Peace and Security and reiterates the EU's commitment to the full implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325 and its follow-up resolutions. The Council stresses the importance of full and meaningful participation of women in conflict prevention, peacebuilding and conflict resolution as well as in building the resilience of local communities. The Council reaffirms the commitment of the EU and its Member States to ensuring that the rights, agency, and protection of women and girls are always observed and upheld before, during and after conflict. The Council reiterates its commitment to the new EU Strategic Approach to Women, Peace and Security (EU Strategic Approach to WPS), which emphasises the need for concrete commitments and actions as well as the need to engage, empower, protect, and support women and girls in order to achieve sustainable and lasting peace and security as intrinsic components of human rights and sustainable development, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its SDGs and the new European Consensus on Development.
5. The Council welcomes the on-going progress made in the implementation of the GAP II as presented in the 2018 implementation report. The Council urges the Commission, the High Representative and the Member States to further strengthen their support for gender equality, the full enjoyment of human rights by all women and girls and their empowerment across the globe and to play a key and increasing role in streamlining and leveraging resources to that end.

6. The Council notes with satisfaction the EU's increased emphasis on gender equality and women's empowerment, as reflected in the 2018 implementation report, in particular in the area of economic, social and cultural rights, including business and human rights; the increased use of gender analysis to inform project design and formulation; the continued improvements towards an institutional culture shift; the enhanced coherence and better coordination between EU institutions, and between these institutions and EU Member States; the better inclusion of gender equality and human rights considerations in policy and political dialogues; and strengthened role in fostering accountability in the humanitarian system to address gender-based violence. It also welcomes the higher prominence and visibility that the EU now gives to gender equality issues in relevant international fora, including the UN Commission on the Status of Women.
7. While highlighting the achievements made thus far, the Council notes that progress has been uneven across the thematic priorities and amongst different EU actors. Much still remains to be done and it will require more joint efforts by the Commission, the High Representative and all Member States to fully implement the EU's gender equality policy in external relations and attain the minimum performance standards set out in the Gender Action Plan (2016-2020).
8. The Council notes with great concern that, despite the progress observed until now, at the current pace of progress, it will be difficult to achieve the GAP target by 2020, namely that 85% of all new actions will contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment, either significantly (G-marker 1) or principally (G-marker 2).² In this context, the Council notes with concern the recent estimates indicating that SDG5 remains severely underfunded. The Council therefore strongly encourages all actors to join their efforts to speed up the achievement of this target. In that context, the Council reminds the Commission, the High Representative and Member States of the need to include gender equality objectives in all possible circumstances, and to provide justification in all cases where this is not possible.³ It also recalls that the ambitious gender equality targets should include other dimensions, such as age and disability in order to ensure positive compounding effect.

² As defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC).

³ In such cases an action scores '0' using the gender equality marker ('G0').

9. The EU remains committed to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of all human rights and to the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the outcomes of their review conferences and remains committed to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), in this context. Having that in mind, the Council reaffirms the EU's commitment to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of the right of every individual to have full control over, and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion and violence. The EU further stresses the need for universal access to quality and affordable comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information, education, including comprehensive sexuality education, and health-care services. The Council welcomes the detailed reporting, including in Annex 5 of the implementation report, on EU's activities on sexual and reproductive health and rights as outlined in the new European Consensus on Development, and is pleased to note the increase in funding in this area in 2018. However, in view of the reported decrease in the number of new interventions, the Council encourages the Commission and the Member States to step up their efforts in this area in the coming years. In this regard, the Council recalls the commitments made at the International Conference on Development and Population, which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, and stresses the need to improve the global reporting methodology. Furthermore, the Council stresses the importance to continue mobilising additional funds and supporting stakeholders in this area.
10. The Council welcomes the increased EU focus on combatting all forms of discrimination and violence, as part of the broader phenomenon of gender-based vulnerabilities and violence, which is in turn closely intertwined with persistent inequalities and broader attacks on gender equality, women's and girls' full enjoyment of human rights, including online, digital and cyber violence. In this spirit, the Council calls upon the Commission, the High Representative and all Member States to contribute to the full and effective implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which celebrates its 40th anniversary this year.

11. The Council also welcomes the focus on addressing abuse and harassment by relevant stakeholders in development cooperation, in the humanitarian context and in conflict-related settings. It underlines the importance of complying with the commitments contained in the OECD/DAC Recommendation on Ending Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance.
12. Furthermore, the Council calls upon all EU actors, including Member States, to remain committed to preventing, combatting and prosecuting all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage, honour-related violence, as well as conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, trafficking, sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, online/cyber violence and bullying. In this context, the Council stresses the need for survivor assistance and recalls the EU's commitment to prevent, combat and prosecute all forms of sexual and gender-based violence, including against men and boys, without discrimination on the basis of the survivor's sexual orientation and gender identity. Sexual and gender-based violence constitutes both a cause and result of gender inequality. Specific attention should be paid to women and girls who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons, women and girls with disabilities.
13. In that context, the Council is pleased to note the continued progress on the implementation of the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative to eliminate violence against women and girls worldwide, which amounted to EUR 270 million committed for programmes in Africa and Latin America in 2018. Likewise, the Council commends the EU's strong leadership on the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies and the support provided to the survivors of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, including through the work of the two 2018 Nobel Peace Prize laureates, Nadia Murad and Dr Denis Mukwege. In this context, the Council further underlines the importance of the outcome of the Oslo Conference on Ending Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Humanitarian Crises.

14. The Council underlines that gender equality is a critical objective at every stage of life and for persons of all ages, through different phases and transitions in their lives. These may include starting school, joining the labour market, pregnancy and having children, marriage, widowhood and retirement.
15. The Council reiterates the need to engage men and boys in ending all forms of violence against women and girls, eliminating gender inequalities, raise their awareness about the impact of gender inequalities and to promote their active and meaningful role in supporting behavioural change, addressing discriminatory social norms and combating gender stereotypes.
16. The Council stresses the need for the Commission, the High Representative and Member States to continue to substantially improve the systematic use of gender analysis and the consistent mainstreaming of a gender perspective, including the collection and use of sex- and age-disaggregated data and gender-sensitive indicators in identification, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all processes in the EU's external action, including in areas such as trade, infrastructure-related investment, private sector investment and blending programmes, security-related initiatives and climate change. Particular attention should also be paid in all external action and international cooperation to thematic areas which have a potential gender transformative objective and content, and to examining and challenging the institutional, social and systemic norms and behaviours at the root of gender inequality, as they are crucial to bring about a deeper change. The human rights-based approach to development should support these efforts, including by fully integrating gender equality within the toolbox “A rights-based approach, encompassing all human rights for EU development cooperation”. The Council also stresses the importance of further strengthening the institutional culture shift to reinforce gender equality.

17. The Council underlines the importance of strong cooperation with civil society in implementing the GAP II and more generally in achieving the SDGs. It values the critical role of civil society, grassroots women's organisations and human rights defenders through active engagement and consultation. In this regard, the Council calls on the Commission, the High Representative and the Member States to continue and strengthen their cooperation and consultation with civil society organisations working towards gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. This should be done at all levels in the implementation of the GAP II, including in gender analysis, and throughout the programming and policy cycles. The need for enhanced safety and security for women, women's organisations and women human rights defenders and an enabling environment for civil society, should be duly taken into account. Attention should also be paid to women and girls living in rural areas.
18. In order to ensure the full implementation of all the EU commitments on gender equality in external relations, the Council encourages the Commission and the High Representative to continue working comprehensively on establishing an ambitious agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment, together with the Member States.
19. As we approach the 2020 line-up of important milestones - such as the 25th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the 5th anniversary of the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, and the renewal of the EU Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019 - and in the light of the proposed accession of the EU to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention), the Council calls on all actors to devote special attention to ensuring coherence between internal and external EU policies and action.
20. Against this background, the Council is pleased to note the launch of the evaluation on the implementation of GAP II and reiterates the need to continue to develop simplified, user-friendly and qualitative reporting mechanisms. The Council invites the Commission to draw on its findings to ensure sustainability of the progress made under GAP II, and focus its efforts toward a new EU Gender Action Plan in 2020, with a high level of ambition, integration and implementation in all external policy areas.